Module 5 Social Issues

Lecture 26
Education

The changing role of education

Although most citizens of industrialized countries take it for granted, modern education, involving the instruction of pupils in specially constructed school premises, took a long time to emerge. For centuries, formal education was available only to few who had the time and money to pursue it. Before the invention of printing press in 1454, books were laboriously copied by hand and were therefore scarce and expensive. Reading was not necessary or even useful in the daily lives of many people. For the vast majority of the population, growing up meant learning by imitation the same social habits and practical social skills as elders. Children began assisting with domestic, farm and manual work at an early age, becoming highly knowledgeable about the land or the production of the crafts by their mid-teenage years. Local customs were passed down through generations, while the oral tradition of storytelling ensured that legends and epic tales were preserved in a dynamic form. Things have changed dramatically since pre modern times. In industrialized countries today, literacy is high – that is almost everyone possesses the ability to read and write at basic level. Almost all the members of society are aware of belonging to it, and have at least some knowledge of geographical position in the world and of its past history. Our lives are influenced at all ages beyond infancy by information we pick up through books, newspapers and magazines and television. We have all undergone a process of formal schooling. The printed word and electronic communication, combined with formal teaching provided by schools and colleges, have become fundamental to our way of life.

Education and Industrialization

The process of industrialization and the expansion of cities greatly influenced the development of the education system. Until the first few decades of the nineteenth century, most of the population had no schooling whatsoever. But as the industrial economy rapidly expanded, there was a great demand for specialized schooling that could produce an educated, capable workforce. As occupations became more differentiated and were increasingly located away from the home, it was impossible for work skills to be passed on directly from parents to children. As educational system became universal, more and more people were exposed to abstract learning (of subjects like mathematics, science, history, literature and so forth), rather than to the practical transmission of specific skills. In a modern society, people have to be furnished with basic skills, such as reading, writing and calculating and a general knowledge of their physical, social and economic environment, but it is also important that they know how to learn, so that they are able to master new, sometimes very technical, forms of information. An advanced society also needs ‘pure’ research insights with no immediate practical value to push out the boundaries of knowledge. In the modern age, education and qualifications became an important stepping stone into job opportunities and careers. Schools and universities not only broaden people’s minds and perspectives, but are
expected to prepare new generations of citizens for participation in economic life. The right balance between a generalist education and specific work skills is a difficult one to arrive at. Specialized forms of technical, vocational and professional training often supplement pupils’ ‘liberal’ education and facilitate the transition from school to work. Internships and work experience schemes, for example, allow young people to develop specific knowledge applicable to their future careers. While many teachers in school and universities seek above all to provide a well-rounded education, policy makers and employers are concerned to ensure the education and training programmes coincide with a country’s economic profile and employment demands. Yet in times of rapid economic and technical change, there is not always a smooth match between priorities of the educational system and the availability of professional opportunities. The rapid expansion of a country’s health care system, for example, would dramatically increase the demand for trained health professionals, laboratory technicians, capable administrators and computer systems analysts familiar with public health issues. Industry-wise changes in factory-floor production technology would require a workforce with a set of skills that might be in short supply.

**Education and Politics**

Education has long been a political battleground and continues to be so at the start of this new century. A protracted debate has centered on the impact of comprehensive schooling – on educational standards and on inequalities in the wider society. Originally comprehensive education attracted support from both ends of the political spectrum. It was the Labor government, as mentioned which set the comprehensive system into motion, however, and therefore support for comprehensive education has tended to be associated much more with the political left than with the right. The architects of comprehensive education believed that the new schools would provide for greater equality of opportunities than was possible in selective education. They did not give much thought to the curriculum as such, being more concerned with equality of access.

**The Comprehensive System and its Critics**

Critics of the comprehensive system believe that it has failed in two ways. According to such critics, comprehensive schools have not promoted greater equality of opportunity, but rather the reverse. Bright children from poorer backgrounds could prosper in the days of eleven-plus; in comprehensive schools, they are held back. Equally important, the critics say, the comprehensive schools provide only a poor standard of education, because excellence goes unrewarded and specialization is discouraged. Before the introduction of the comprehensive school system, 20 percent of pupils passed the eleven-plus and went on to grammar school. With the reform, the idea was to create schools with a mixture of able and less able children. Each comprehensive school would also have 20 percent of pupils in the upper range of ability. Things have not turned out like that. As measured by exam results, only 27 percent of comprehensives have 20 percent or more pupils in the upper ability range. As part of this pattern, pupils in this ability band are more concentrated than they were intended to be: 18 percent of comprehensive schools have more than 20 percent of children in that range. These schools in effect, if not in name, have become grammar schools. Less successful schools in the system have become more or less equivalent to the old secondary moderns. In 38 per cent of schools the proportion of pupils in the top ability range is 10 per cent or less, while in 16
per cent of schools the proportion is under 5 per cent. The selection processes which have produced this situation operate in several ways. In the first place, the eleven-plus never disappeared completely. There are ninety-five remaining grammar schools, which still use the test, and they draw more able children in their area away from the other schools; and grammar schools are still common in Northern Ireland. Within the comprehensive system, schools are supposed to take the correct shares of each ability band, but further selection processes work informally, and they are no less powerful for all that. Schools have to give priority to children within their area. Parents can thus ‘buy’ their children into favored schools by ensuring that they have the right address. Middle-class parents have become adept at ensuring that their children are admitted to the school of their choice. Those children who come from more advantaged backgrounds tend to benefit more through school selection, while those who are disadvantaged find their position further weakened. A substantial percentage of schools which have opted out of local authority control take personal and medical factors into account in deciding about entry. According to a recent study, over 50 per cent of such schools apply selective criteria in such a way (Hugill 1996). Proposals introduced by the Conservatives in 1996 will allow all state schools to select up to 15 per cent of their pupils, either by ability or a specialist subject such as science or music. They will be able to select a higher proportion with special permission from the government. Opting out was supposed to increase parental choice by creating diversity in the school system. But the unintended consequence might be to reduce such choice: an increasing number of children are being denied a place at their first choice of school.

**Education and New Communications Technology**

The spread of information technology is already influencing education in schools in a number of different ways. The knowledge economy demands a computer literate workforce and it is increasingly clear that education can, and must, play a critical role in meeting this need. While household computer ownership has risen sharply in recent years, many children still do not have access to computer at home. For this reason, schools are a crucial forum for young people to learn about and become comfortable with the capabilities of computers and online technology.

**Technology in the Classroom**

The rise of education in its modern sense was connected with a number of other major changes happening in the nineteenth century. One was the development of printing and the arrival of ‘book culture’. The mass distribution of books, newspapers and other printed media was a distinctive feature of the development of industrial society as were machines and factories. Education provided the skills of literacy and numeracy giving access to the world of printed media. Nothing is more characteristic of the school than the schoolbook or textbook. In the eyes of many, all this is set to change with the growing use of computers and multimedia technology in education. Will the internet, CDROM and video-tape increasingly replace the schoolbook? And will schools still exist in anything like the form in which they do today if children turn on their computers in order to learn, rather than listening to a teacher? The new technologies, it is said, will not just add to the existing curriculum, they will undermine and transform it. For young people now are already growing up in an information- and media-related society and are much more familiar with its technologies than
most adults are – including their teachers. Some observers speak of a ‘class revolution’ – the arrival of ‘desk-top virtual reality’ and the classroom without walls. There is little question that computers have expanded opportunities in education. They provide the chance for children to work independently, to research topics with the help of online resources, and to benefit from educational software that allows them to progress at their own pace. Yet the vision (or nightmares) of classrooms of children learning exclusively through individual computer has not yet come to pass. In fact, the ‘classroom without walls’ looks some way off. For one thing, there are simply not enough computers to go around at schools or in the home!. Even well-resourced schools must develop rotating schedules which allow students turn at computer workstations. In schools with a small number of computers, students may spend only a few minutes a week behind a computer, or may have information technology lessons in small groups. The majority of homes still do not possess a computer. Second, most teachers see computers as a supplement to traditional lessons, rather than as a replacement for them. Pupils can use computers to complete tasks within the standard curriculum, such as producing a research project or investigating current events. But few educators see information technology as a medium that can substitute for learning from and interacting with human teachers. The challenge for teacher is learning to integrate new information technology into lessons in a way that is meaningful and educationally sound.

Education and Technology Gap

Whether the new technologies will have the radical implications for education claimed by some still an open question. Critics have pointed out that even if they do have major effects, these may act to reinforce educational inequalities. Information poverty might be added to the material deprivations which currently have such an effect on schooling. The sheer pace of technological change and the demand of employers for computer literate workers may mean that those who are technologically competent ‘leapfrog’ over people who have little experience with computers.

Some already fear the emergence of a ‘computer underclass’ within Western societies. Although developed countries have the highest levels of computer and internet usage in the world, there are stark inequalities in computer use within those societies. Many schools and colleges are suffering from under-funding and long-standing neglect; even if these institutions become beneficiaries of schemes that distribute second-hand computer hardware to schools, they must gain the technical expertise and ability to teach IT skills to pupils. Because the market for computer specialists is so strong, many schools are struggling to attract and keep IT teachers, who can earn far greater incomes in the private sector. But as the global economy becomes increasingly knowledge based, there is a real danger that poorer countries will become even more marginalized because of the gap between the information rich and information poor. According to the UNDP Human Development Report (1999), internet access has become the new lines of demarcation between the rich and the poor. South Asia, with 23 percent of the world’s total population, has less than 1 percent of the world internet users. Information technology enthusiasts argue that computers need not result in greater national and global inequalities – that their very strength lies in their ability to draw people together and to open up new opportunities. Schools in Asia and Africa that are lacking textbooks and qualified teachers can benefit from the internet, it is claimed. Distance learning programs and collaboration with colleagues overseas could be the key to overcoming poverty
and disadvantage. When technology is put in the hands of smart, creative people, they argue, the potential is limitless. While technology can be breathtaking and open important doors, it has to be recognized that there is no such things as an easy ‘techno-fix’. Underdeveloped regions struggling with mass literacy and lacking telephone lines and electricity need an improved educational infrastructure before they can truly benefit from distance learning programmers. The internet cannot be substituted for direct contact between teacher and pupils under these conditions.

Privatizing Education

Within most state education systems, some schools attain high results while others persistently underachieve. In many areas, parents and children alike express dissatisfaction with the quality of education received through state schools, while teachers and others responsible for the education are often faced with larger classes, limited resources and difficult working conditions. While some parents are able to provide their children with private education, the vast majority of families rely on state schools expect that then educational system funded by their own tax payments will provide a quality education for their children.

One of the main tasks confronting educational reformers is how to reproduce successful outcomes from the best schools in schools that are struggling. In instances where persistently underperforming schools are unable to improve their results, local educational authorities have invited bids from private contractors to take over the management and day to day administration of state school systems. As a growing number of private companies and ‘educational management organizations’ become involved in administering educational activities., some observers believe we are witnessing a move towards the privatization of education.

Theories of Schooling and Inequality

Bernstein: Language Codes

There are several theoretical perspectives on the nature of the modern education and its implications for inequality. One approach emphasizes linguistic skills. In the 1970s Basil Bernstein argued that children from varied backgrounds develop different codes, or forms of speech during their early lives, which affect their subsequent school experience (Bernstein, 1975). He is not concerned with differences in vocabulary or verbal skills, as these are usually thought of his; his interest is in systematic differences in ways of using language, particularly contrasting poorer and wealthier children.

The speech of working class children, Bernstein contends, represents a restricted code- a way of using language containing many unstated assumptions which speakers expect others to know. A restricted code is a type of speech tied to its own cultural setting. Many working class people live in a strong familial or neighborhood culture in which values and norms are taken for granted and not expressed in language. Parents tend to socialize their children directly by the use of rewards or reprimands to correct their behavior. Language in a restricted code is more suitable for communication about practical experience than for
discussion of more abstract ideas, processes or relationship. Restricted code speech is thus characteristics of children growing up in lower-class families, and of peer groups in which they spend their time. Speech is oriented towards norms of the group, without anyone easily being able to explain why they follow the patterns of behavior they do.

The language development of middle-class children, by contrast, according to Bernstein, involves the acquisition of an elaborated code – a style of speaking in which the meanings of words can be individualized to suit the demands of particular situations. The ways in which the children from middle-class background learn to use language are less bound to particular contexts; the child is able more easily to generalize and express abstract ideas. Thus, middle-class mothers, when controlling their children, frequently explain the reasons and principles that underlie their reactions to the child’s behavior. While a working-class mother might tell a child off for wanting to eat too many sweets by simply saying ‘No more sweets for you!’ , a middle class mother is more likely to explain that eating too many sweet is bad for one’s health and the state of one’s teeth.

Children who have acquired elaborated codes of speech, Bernstein proposes, are more able to deal with the demands of formal academic education than those confined to restricted codes. This does not imply that working-class children have an ‘inferior’ type of speech, or that their codes of language are ‘deprived’. Rather the way in which they use speech clashes with the academic culture of the school. Those who have mastered elaborated codes fit much more easily into the school environment.

There is evidence to back up Bernstein’s theory, although its validity is still debated. Joan Tough studied the language of working-class and middle-class children, finding systematic differences. She backs up Bernstein’s thesis that working-class children generally have less experience of having their questions answered, or of being offered explanations about the reasoning of others (Tough 1976). The same conclusion was reached in subsequent research by Barbara Tizard and Martin Hughes (1984).

Bernstein’s ideas help us to understand why those from certain socio-economic backgrounds tend to be ‘underachievers’ at school. The following traits have been associated with restricted code speech, all of them inhibiting a child’s educational chances:

The child probably receives limited responses to questions asked at home, and therefore is likely to be both less well informed and less curious about the wider world than those mastering elaborated codes.

The child will find it difficult to respond to the unemotional and abstract language used in teaching, as well as to appeals to general principles of school discipline.

Much of what the teacher says is likely to be incomprehensible, using language in a way the child is not accustomed to. The child may attempt to cope with this by translating the teacher’s language into something she or he is familiar with- but then could fail to grasp the very principles the teachers intends to convey.
While the child will experience little difficulty with rote or ‘drill’ learning, she or he may have major difficulties in grasping conceptual distinctions involving generalization and abstractions.

**Illich: The Hidden Curriculum**

One of the most controversial writers on educational theory is Ivan Illich. He is noted for his criticisms of modern economic development, which he describes as a process whereby previously self sufficient people are dispossessed of their traditional skills and made to rely on doctors for their health, teachers for their schooling, television for their entertainment and employers for their subsistence. Illich argues that the very notion of compulsory schooling—now accepted throughout the world—should be questioned (1973). He stresses the connection between the developments of education and the requirements of the economy for discipline and hierarchy. Illich argues that schools have developed to cope with four basic tasks: the provision of custodial care, the distribution of people among occupational roles, the learning of dominant values and the acquisition of socially approved skills and knowledge. In relation to the first, the school has become a custodial organization because attendance is obligatory, and children are ‘kept off the streets’ between early childhood and their entry into work.

Much is learnt in school which has nothing to do with formal content of lessons. Schools tend to inculcate what Illich called *passive consumption*—an uncritical acceptance of the social order—by the nature of the discipline and regimentation they involve. These lessons are not consciously taught; they are implicit in the school procedures and organization. The hidden curriculum teaches children that their role in life is ‘to know their place and sit still in it’ (Illich 1973).

Illich advocates *deschooling* society. Compulsory schooling is a relatively recent invention, he points out; there is no reason why it should be accepted as somehow inevitable. Since schools do not promote equality or the development of individual’s creative abilities, why not do away with them in their current form? Illich does not mean by this that all forms of educational organization should be abolished. Everyone who wants to learn should be provided with access to available resources—at any time in their lives, not just in their childhood and adolescent years. Such a system should make it possible for knowledge to be widely diffused and shared, not confined to specialists. Learners should not have to submit to a standard curriculum, and they should have personal choice over what they study.

What all these means in practical terms is not wholly clear. In place of schools, however, Illich suggests several types of *educational framework*. Material resources for formal learning would be stored in libraries, rental agencies, laboratories and information storage banks, available to any student. ‘Communications networks’ would be set up, providing data about the skills possessed by different individuals and whether they would be willing to train others and engage in mutual learning activities.

Are these proposals wholly utopian? Many would say so. Yet if, as looks possible, paid work is substantially reduced or restructured in the future, they appear less unrealistic. Were paid employment to become less central to social life, people might instead engage in wider variety of pursuits. Against this backdrop, some of Illich ideas make good sense. Education
would not be just a form of early training, confined to special institutions, but would become available to whoever wished to take advantage of it.

Illich’s ideas of 1970s become fashionable again in the 1990s with the rise of new communications technologies.

**Bourdieu: Education and Cultural Reproduction**

Perhaps the most illuminating way of connecting some of the themes of these theoretical perspectives is through the concept of cultural reproduction (Bourdieu 1986, 1988; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Cultural reproduction refers to the ways in which schools, in conjunction with other social institutions, help perpetuate social and economic inequalities across the generations. The concepts direct our attention to the means whereby, via the hidden curriculum, schools influence the learning of values, attitudes and habits. Schools reinforce variations in cultural values and outlooks picked up early in the life; when children leave schools; these have the effects of limiting the opportunities of some, while facilitating those of others.

The modes of language use identified by Bernstein no doubt connect with such broad cultural differences, which underlie variations in interests and tastes. Children from lower-class backgrounds, and often from minority groups, develop ways of talking and acting which clash with some dominant in schools. Schools impose rules of disciplines on pupils, the authority of teachers being oriented towards academic learning. Working-class children experience a much greater cultural clash when they enter schools than those from more privileged homes. The former find themselves in effect in a foreign cultural environment.

Children spend long hours in schools. As Illich stresses, they learn much more there than is contained in the lessons they are officially taught. Children get an early taste of what the world of work would be like, learning that they are expected to be punctual and apply themselves diligently the tasks which those in authority set for them( Web and Westergaard 1991).

**Willis: An Analysis of Cultural Reproduction**

A celebrated discussion of cultural reproduction is provided in the report of a fieldwork study carried out by Paul Willis in a school in Birmingham (1977). Although the study was conducted more than two decades ago, it remains a classic sociological investigation.

The question Willis set out to investigate was how cultural reproduction occurs- or, a she puts it, ‘how working-class kids get working-class jobs’. It is often thought that, during the process of schooling, children from lower-class or minority backgrounds simply come to see that they are not clever enough to expect to get highly paid or high status job in their future work lives. In other words, the experience of academic failure teaches them to recognize their intellectual limitations; having accepted their ‘inferiority’, they move into occupations with limited carrier prospects.
As Willis points out, this interpretation does not conform at all to the reality of people’s lives and experiences. The ‘street wisdom’ of those from poor neighborhood may be of little or no relevance to academic success, but involves as subtle, skillful and complex a set of abilities as any of the intellectual skills taught in schools. Few if any children leave school thinking ‘I’m so stupid that it’s fair and proper for me to be stacking boxes in a factory all day.’ If children from less privileged background accept menial jobs, without feeling themselves throughout life to be failures, there must be other factors involved. Willis concentrated on a particular boys ‘group in the school, spending a lot of time with them. The members of the gang, who called themselves ‘the lads’ were white; the schools also contained many children from West Indian and Asian backgrounds. Willis found that the lads had an acute and perspective understanding of the school’s authority system - but used this to fight that system rather than work with it. They saw the schools as an alien environment, but one they could manipulate to their own ends. They derived positive pleasure from the constant conflict – which they kept mostly to minor skirmishes – they carried on with teachers. They were adept at seeing the weak points of the teachers’ claims to authority, as well as where they were vulnerable as individuals. In class, for instance, the children were expected to sit still, be quiet and get on with their work. But the lads were all movements, save when the teacher’s stare might freeze one of them momentarily; they would gossip surreptitiously, or pass open remarks that were on the verge of direct insubordination but could be explained away if challenged. The lads recognized that work would be much more like school, but they actively looked forward to it. They expected to gain no direct satisfaction from the work environment, but were impatient for wages. Far from taking the jobs they did – in tyre fitting, carpet laying, plumbing, painting and decorating – from feelings of inferiority, they held an attitude of dismissive superiority towards work, as they had towards school. They enjoyed the adult status that came from working, but were not interested in ‘making a career’ for themselves. As Willis points out, work in blue collar settings often involves quite similar cultural features to those the lads created in their counter school culture – banter, quick wit and the skill to subvert the demands of authority figures when necessary. Only later in their lives might they come to see themselves as trapped in arduous, unrewarding labour. When they have families, they might perhaps look back on education retrospectively, and see it – hopelessly – as having been the only escape. Yet if they try to pass this view on to their own children, they are likely to have no more success than their own parents did.

**Gender and Education**

The formal curriculum in schools, apart from participation in games, no longer distinguishes in any systematic way between boys and girls. However, there are various other ‘points of entry’ for the development of gender differences in education. These include teacher expectations, school rituals and other aspects of a hidden curriculum. Although rules are gradually loosening, regulations which compel girls to wear dresses or skirts in school from one of the most obvious ways in which gender typing occur. The consequences go beyond mere appearance. As a result of the clothes she wears, a girl lacks the freedom to sit casually, to join in rough and tumble games, or sometimes to run as fast as she is able. School textbooks also help to perpetuate gender images. Although this again is changing, story books in primary schools often portrays boys as showing initiative and independence, while girls, if they appear at all, are more passive and watch their brothers. Stories written especially for
girls often have an element of adventure in them, but this usually takes the form of intrigues or mysteries in a domestic or school setting. Boys’ adventure stories are more wide-ranging, having heroes who travel off to distant places or are sturdily independent in other ways (Statham 1986). At the secondary level, females tend to be ‘invisible’ in most science and maths textbooks, perpetuating the view that these are ‘male subjects’.

**References**


**Questions**

1. How is industrialization impacting education?
2. Explain the Comprehensive system with regard to education and its critics.
3. What is the role of technology in education?
4. Is privatization of education ideal in the changing scenario?
5. Elucidate the various theories of Schooling and inequality.
6. Explain the correlation between gender and education.